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'Secret War' in Nicaragua Compromise U.S. Interests

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At least one good thing came out of the much-derided lame-duck session of Congress last December: an end to the Reagan Administration's covert war against Nicaragua. On Dec. 8, the House, by a vote of 411-0, approved an amendment to the Intelligence Authorization Act of 1983, prohibiting the United States from providing "military equipment, military training or advice for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of Nicaragua"; the Senate concurred in committee. Now it is up to President Reagan to honor both the letter and the spirit of this provision, and pursue a negotiated settlement of our differences with Sandinistan Government.

The recent history of American covert activities in Nicaragua stretches back to the Carter Administration. In 1978, President Carter, realizing the imminent collapse of the repressive regime of dictator Anastosio Somoza, instructed the Central Intelligence Agency to seek out and aid the more moderate, pro-western elements among the Nicaraguan revolutionaries. But when the popularly-supported, Cuban-backed Sandinistas came to power, Mr. Carter, still hoping to preserve some semblance of United States influence in Nicaragua, immediately recognized the new government.

When President Reagan took office however the United States became less tolerant of the Sandinistas. The President and his advisors were convinced that Nicaragua was providing arms to the Communist guerillas in El Salvador, and that the Sandinistas were committed to exporting revolution to Honduras, Guatemala, even Mexico—a Latin American domino theory. Clearly, something had to be done to contain this threat.

In December of 1981, President Reagan authorized the largest American covert operation in over a decade to combat the Sandinistas. The Administratin's plan, as disclosed in the Nov. 8 issue of Newsweek, originally envisioned a 500 man, United States-trained paramilitay squad, combined with a 1,000 man Argentine-backed force, at a cost of $20 million. The objective of the insurgents was to cut off the arms supply from Nicaragua. But what the United States ultimately established was a 1,200 man, Honduran-based counter-revolutionary army, consisting mainly of former members of Somoza's National Guard, trained armed and even directed by C.I.A. and American military personnel stationed in Honduras. The expressed goal of this exile army was the overthrow of the Sandinistas.

The results for American foreign policy have been disasterous. For one, rather than weakening the Sandinistas, the insurgents' efforts have actually strengthened the position of the Nicaraguan government. The contra's tactics, such as destroying the peasants' upcoming coffee crop, have done little to endear them to the people. And the threat of a return to the power of the deposed Somocistas, the one opposition group with absolutely no popular support in Nicaragua, has prompted the rest of the country's various political factions to close ranks behing the Sandinistas. Indeed, by aligning with the reactionary former Guardsmen, the United States has lost whatever chance it had to establish connections with any of the legitimately nationalistic Nicaraguan dissident leaders, such as the former Sandinista Eden Pastora.

It is also commonly conceded that the Reagan Administration has lost control of the force it has created. Having provided the contras with weapons, training, and logistical support, it may be too late for the United States

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to call the mission off. In the ensuing bloody struggle, our role in the war as well as our helplessness in directing its outcome, could prove to be a great international embarassment for America. One U.S. official could not resist drawing the inevitable historical analogy: he called the Administration's sponsorship of the operation, "our Bay of Pigs."

The Reagan Administration's instigation of this "secret" war against Nicaragua has also resulted in another unwelcome side-effect for the United States: the destabilization of Honduras. This once relatively tranquil, pro-American nation, has seen a resurgence of domestic political violence in the wake of the anti-Sandinista campaign.

Honduras now also faces an external threat from Nicaragua, which has instituted a massive arms build-up to counter the insurgents based in Honduras. Social and political polarization, the makings of civil war, now exist in Honduras; under these circumstances, the Reagan Administration's domino theory could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The exposure of the Reagan Administration's role in the offensive against the Sandinistas, has lowered the United States's standing in Latin America in general. Latin Americans are sensitive to United States intervention in their affairs, given the United States's history of imperialism south of its borders. These countries appreciate U.S. aid, but they value their political sovereignty even more.

Latin Americans displayed their displeasure with the efforts to destabilize Nicaragua during President Reagan's recent trip to Central and South America. In Colombia, students protested against U.S. actions, and President Betancur rebuked Reagan for creating "exclusions in the inter-American system." Thanks to the Administration's Nicaraguan policy, supporting the United States is becoming a political liability for Latin American governments.

President Reagan, for his part, can now formulate a more sensible and realistic Nicaraguan policy. Instead of alienating the people of Nicaragua and pushing the Sandinistas more tightly into the Soviet embrace, instead of trying to solve a political problem by military means, President Reagan should seek a negotiated rapprochement with the Sadanistas. The United States must recognize, as Nicaragua's recently recalled Ambassador to the U.S. counseled, that "the problems of Nicaraguans should be solved by Nicaraguans."